

Yoga and Your Health: Dealing with Fibromyalgia

By JJ Gormley

I have noticed an increasing number of my yoga students telling me that they have Fibromyalgia. I've researched the diagnosis and treatment of this disease in both the traditional and alternative worlds of medicine. Based on my growing experience with students suffering from Fibromyalgia, I've arrived at my own set of conclusions about this disease and ways of using yoga to help alleviate its symptoms. A caveat is needed here, however. I am not saying that I've discovered a cure nor even the reason why people get this disease. What follows are simply some collected observations from what I've experienced in working with Fibromyalgia sufferers. I pass them along not only for any specific merit they may have, but because I think they speak generally about the overall benefits of yoga in our lives.

Fibromyalgia comes from the Latin *fibro*, meaning connective tissue such as tendons and ligaments, *myo* meaning muscular, and *algia*, meaning pain. Sufferers experience chronic pain in their muscles and joints. Typically the medical establishment treats this chronic pain most commonly with anti-inflammatory drugs, tricyclic antidepressants, acetaminophen, non-narcotic analgesics, and/or anti-anxiety agents. The pain often leads to depression and chronic fatigue, and inability to function mentally at work, with all its attendant consequences. Typically the pain can leave the sufferer only able to sleep for a couple to a few hours at night, without the benefits of restorative sleep to ease the mind.

Conventional and alternative treatment therapies generally have not produced lasting relief for Fibromyalgia sufferers. *Modern Medicine Magazine* reports that systematic follow-up studies of patients using conventional treatments at Fibromyalgia specialty clinics show no overall improvement over the baseline condition, although different patients improved and deteriorated in specific areas. Chiropractic adjustments and

acupuncture treatments are sometimes sought to try and alleviate pain, but from what I've been told by my yoga students, the relief is only temporary.

Based on my experience with yoga students who suffer from Fibromyalgia, I've developed a general profile from simple questions asked during private sessions. Typically, these students are go-getters, with high energy levels, who give selflessly of their time and energy to others, more frequently than not putting others' needs before their own. From an energetic expenditure perspective, the energy these students expend dramatically exceeds the energy returned, leaving their energetic body depleted over time until the physical body finally follows. This led me to conclude that major behavioral shifts must take place to reverse the flow of energy so a balance is achieved. Because sufferers do not reverse this energy expenditure on their own, the body forces them to take care of themselves. The disease's debilitating symptoms alone compel such care. But permanent behavior shifts need to occur as well. The more debilitating the illness, the more sufferers need to help themselves, by taking more time for themselves first before service to others' needs. This is the first step toward healing—a major and most difficult step for this profile of student. This is where yoga comes in. Those already taking the time from their busy schedules to incorporate a yoga class (or two) see the benefits of treating your body to some fun stretching and strengthening. This time for yourself in a healing and healthy way is a vital step toward reversing energy expenditure.

Looking at the physical body of a typical Fibromyalgia sufferer, I see that the body is obviously out of balance, out of sync with nature and in need of nurturing. My first instinct is for the person to give themselves hugging types of poses: child's pose or half-child's pose if the body is very tight, egg balance and knee-to-chest pose when lying on back. But more than just nurturing hugs the body needs to experience rhythmic movements, or cyclical movements such as gentle sun-salutes. I always recommend starting with just one or two rounds of sun-salutes and then following up with a resting pose or restorative poses such as open butterfly pose (*supta baddhakonasana*). This sequence of sun-salutes followed by a resting pose can be done several times in a row for about a 10 to 20 minute routine. Four to 5 minutes of inclined rest (*savasana*), with the

eyes kept open (this is to counter depression setting in and taking the person on a dive downward) should complete the overall session. For the most part, one should avoid forward bends because of their downward energy (calming affect), but backbends can be added into the sequence depending on the person's ability. Active backbends such as cobra, updog, camel, etc. can be added during the heating portion of the routine, while lying over a bolster in a passive backbend can be added during the restive portion.

I have been giving this type of routine to my students over the past eight years and have had much success with students suffering from not only fibromyalgia, but also chronic fatigue and depression. By no means would I suggest it as a cure-all for those suffering from these illnesses, but it would certainly be worth a try.

Namaste,

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